The Innkeeper's Tale

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The Innkeeper's Tale

for
Bobby, with a many
enjoyable wishes concerning
this Christmas —
from
Davy
December '09

DAVID DEFOREST BURRELL

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The Innkeeper's Tale

ERE in Bethlehem-Judah, these two score years and more, have I kept the inn my father kept, and his father before him. Here was I born. In this wide, sun-beaten court I met the world. Those dark arches against the outer wall bounded the realm of my boyhood; but through the gateway yonder, the great world beyond came to me. Persian, Arab, Roman, Jew, I met them all on these cobbles. To live in an inn is to live everywhere. Boy and stripling, I foregathered with Arab sheik and Egyptian muleteer alike. Many a skin of water did I fill at the spring down there in the hollow to the southword, trudging up hither with it to wash the dust down the throats of thirsty merchants and drivers. Only, for Roman soldier never did I lift finger. Time and again, with the other half-grown youngsters of the village, I hid from the sight of gleaming armor and the sound of rolling oaths. The cattle-stable, down there over the brow of the hill, was our hiding place. It was our robber-castle, too, and our treasure chamber, and our cave of Adullam,—that low-roofed cave-stable where one day I was to find my chiefest treasure.

* * * * *

One winter, just before the death of that bloody Herod,—if you remember the year,—that winter came great excitement and turmoil to our village. The Emperor Augustus had decreed the taking of a census; wherefore my story. That census brought to us many who, otherwise, had never seen this city of their fathers. Likewise, it brought to me, already some five years innkeeper in my father's place, much custom. From all quarters they came to sign the Roman's parchment. This courtyard, half empty of a morning, would be packed by sundown. Merchants and traders from the ends of the earth mingled with swarms of our people.

There was a deal of hot language in the air. The people cursed the Romans,—when no Roman was nigh; they cursed Augustus Cæsar, who had ordered the census; they cursed Quirinius, governor of Syria, who had the taking of it; and most bitterly did they curse the mongrel Herod, not many miles away, sitting in his palace at Jerusalem. But they came, my people, when Rome beckoned; and they cursed, and they signed, and they went away cursing the enemies of Israel and praying Heaven to send the long-promised Liberator.

One day, when days were short and nights were chill, came two belated travellers, just as night settled over the valley below. I heard them at the archway, parleying with Elias the porter, but I gave them no more thought than inwardly to give thanks that it was he, not I, who had the turning of them away. A few minutes later I saw that they were still there. Even as I looked, Elias left his post and came toward me, threading his way between bales of merchandise and gossiping loungers. He was scratching his head apologetically as he came up: There were two at the gate, a man and a woman, and they would not leave. He had told them there was no room, no, not even in the stalls under the arches; but they would not be turned away. Would I come? I came. The woman sat upon an ass. Behind her was strapped a roll of rugs, for bedding. Her features I could not make out clearly, nor the man's, in the gloom of the great gateway. With a Galilean tang to his speech, the man told me what he wished,—a room for the woman, who was tired and ill. I shook my head. He insisted; she could not lie out in the open that chilly night.

I shrugged my shoulders. What could I do? There was no room. "Had ye come an hour earlier," I began, only to be cut short.

"Those be strangers' beasts in courtyard and stall," said the man; "Where then dost stable thine own cattle, friend?"

I told him: "In the stable under the hill, through the small gate yonder."

He stopped me at that. "We go there," quoth he, and shortened the leading strap in his hand and waited for me to start.

I led the way. If he wished such quarters he should have them. In the gathering darkness we made our way slowly through the court-yard, through the gate, down the slope to the heavy wooden door of the old cave. I threw open the door. The warm, moist air met us, heavy with the smell of cattle. There was a rustling within. The stranger peered into the darkness. "A light?" he asked.

"I will send you one; wait ye here." In the inn-court I stumbled upon a servant, whom I sent with the lamp to the cave. As I passed Elias on my way to snatch an hour's sleep, "Noble cattle, these Galileans," he chuckled hoarsely, "gone to stable with the herd!"

I answered nothing, being cold and sleepy; but went to my mattress in the dark and lay down.

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It seemed to me that I had scarce lost the sound of Elias' voice when that same voice awoke me, calling from the doorway. I kicked my mattress into a corner, rubbed my eyes, and went grumbling to the archway. There in the light of Elias' torch, which flared from the wall, stood three men, shepherds evidently, from their rough cloaks and their staves. With them was a thin, half-fed dog, that sniffed and snapped at my shins. I rubbed my eyes again, and recognized the men. They were of Bethlehem, all three. "How now! How now! Where be your flocks?" cried I; "and what mean ye waking honest men thus?"

"If thou'rt honest, O son of Chimham, thou'rt the first inn-keeper ever was so!" came the retort from one.

I heard a chuckle from Elias' fat throat. Back of him, in the shadow, stood two or three muleteers, waked from their sleep in the stalls near the gate. I turned again to the shepherds.

"Hark thou, old friend," said the second of them to me, laying a hand on the arm of him who had just bested me. "Where is the child in swaddling bands, lying in thy manger?"

"Art mad?" I cried; and saw, as I spoke, that the eyes of all three gleamed and their faces showed pale in the torch-light. "Art mad?"

"Moon-struck!" quoth Elias.

The shepherd paid no heed to the taunt. "Master Inn-keeper," said he, "somewhere in the village a babe lieth new-born in a manger. Where so likely as in thine, at the inn? We would see the babe."

I laughed at him now. "Back to thy scattered flocks, O son of perdition! There is no babe born in my stalls this night!" But in a flash came to me the thought of the two that slept in the cattle-stable over the hill. Before I could turn, however, or speak, Elias plucked me by the sleeve. "Pardon, master," he said; "There is a babe new-born; in the manger of the cattle-stable it lieth."

Stupidly I looked in his face for a moment. Then I seized the torch from its socket on the wall. "Come," said I shortly; and single file we threaded our way through the sleeping courtyard, out by the little gate, and over the brow of the hill.

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A faint radiance made its way through the cracks of the stable door. The torch I stuck in the ground outside, Elias lifted the latch, and we entered. Near the door a young ox, half broken and wild as a goat of the wilderness, got to his feet with a snort of fear. The other cattle chewed noisily on their cuds. From a far corner the lamp's dim golden light shone on a little group of people. My good wife I saw, and our one maid-servant, kneeling beside a woman who lay upon a rug on the straw-strewn floor. Beyond stood the Galilean. As we stepped softly nearer, I, peering over shoulders, caught sight of a bundle of white in a low, rock-hewn manger, beside which the woman lay. It was the child, and it slept.

Suddenly, while I stood open-mouthed, one of the shepherds elbowed me aside, stepped quickly forward, and knelt beside the manger. The other shepherds followed. The babe's mother watched with a strange light in her eyes. At last the Galilean spoke: "What sent you hither?"

One looked up with glistening eyes. "An angel of the Lord," said he softly, and bent his head again and reverently touched with clumsy fingers the soft, white wrappings of the sleeping child. Then he told his tale:

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"We keep the sacrificial flocks," he said, "in the fold by the sheep-tower, as one goes toward Jerusalem. The night is cold, as ye know. We were huddled, we three and the dog there, under the wall. The sheep were quiet. The dog began to whine. I woke and started forward, expecting some marauder. There was a strange light in the air, white, and clear,—so clear that I call to mind I saw the burrs twisted in the wool of a sheep's back. Then I looked up,—and saw the angel of Jehovah—there—in the midst of the glory! I trembled, and fell to my knees. The dog whined again, and rubbed against me. A voice came clear: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

There was a stir in the stable, a startled, eager movement on the part of every one of us. It gave the man pause for a moment; then he went on: "That is not all. The angel said more: 'This shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes'"—the shepherd's breath came fast as he looked down upon the sleeping child—"'lying in a manger.'"

He ceased speaking. No one else spoke. I stole a glance at the young mother's face. It wore a look of mingled wonder and pain and great joy. Then came the voice of the youngest shepherd, a lad from the far end of the village: "The dog woke me, also. I saw the light and the angel. I heard what Joses here heard. Then came a silence—and then other voices—beyond—above. They were singing. Our father David never heard nor made such music! 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.' Then it was dark,—and we came hither."

* * * * *

Before another day had passed, we moved mother and child to a chamber opening on the gallery that circled the court of the inn. Joseph carried the woman as he would have carried a child. My good wife followed with the little one wrapped in her skirt. It was quiet there on the roof. The child lay and blinked at

the gray ceiling, and looked exceedingly wise, as all babes do. The mother watched and smiled; yet sometimes a shadow fell across her face.

On the eighth day the priest came. We had wine and cakes; and that day was the little one made doubly a son of Israel. They called him Jeshua,—"Jehovah is salvation." The man Joseph would have it so. About a month later the little family went up to the Holy City for a few days, that Joseph might pay his twelve shillings for the child's redemption from the Lord, while the mother offered a turtle-dove in the Temple.

A night or two after their return I overheard strange words in the court. Some merchant, swollen with the news of the Jerusalem bazaars, was easing himself of it: The taxes were heavier than ever,—and who cared to pay taxes for the robes of Herod's mistresses? But the old reprobate was building a marvel of a temple,—tickling the Jews under the chin with his left hand while his right robbed their pockets. Thus he ran on; but the greatest tidbit of news came last. He rolled it under his tongue like a sweetmeat from Jericho. It was the tale of dromedaries three that, while he sat one day under his awning, came softly over the cobbles. On their rich saddles rode men in Persian robes. "Through the market they passed,"—so fell the words from the gossip's lips;—"passed, and stopped, and questioned; and this was ever their query: 'Where is he that is born king of the Jews?' And no man could answer, save one who mocked and shouted, 'Ask of Herod the king!'" Thus far I heard, when from the archway Elias called. I hurried over. As I stood by him I heard through the dark night the pad of a camel's hoofs and the grunting of the beast. A vague form came swiftly through the shadows out into the light, and halted at a word. From the saddle came a voice, "Peace unto you."

"And to thee, also," I answered; "Descend, friend."

"Where is he that is born king of the Jews?" asked the unknown.

Involuntarily I glanced over my shoulder. The merchant still sat gossiping. I caught a shrewd glance from Elias. I answered after a moment, peering up at the shadowy form, "I know not, lord, unless he be the

babe in the upper chamber, of whom the angels spake."

There came a quick sigh of relief from the unknown. He called back into the darkness, and there came a double reply, in the Persian tongue. Then, one after another, three dromedaries paced slowly into the court, followed by half a score of pack animals. The camels knelt. Masters and drivers dismounted. The man who had spoken turned eagerly to me. "Where is the child?" he cried; "We have seen his star in the east, and we come to worship him!"

I turned and led the way up the outer stairway to the gallery. At the door of Joseph's chamber I spoke, softly, and the voice of the mother replied, asking who was there. I turned to the strangers.

The spokesman answered her: "Where is the babe, born king of the Jews?" And out of the darkness came the soft-voiced answer, "Here. Enter!"

Someone called for a light. Back I stepped, trembling, calling for Elias and an oil lamp. One of the strangers passed me and disappeared, going down the steps into the court. Elias passed him, hurrying with a light that flickered behind his curved palm, and in a moment, behind him, back came the stranger with his Eastern servants, all laden with I knew not what. They halted at the door of the room. Elias entered and the three Persians followed. I crept to the door and looked within. There knelt the three and bowed to the floor before the babe. The spokesman of them turned and motioned to the servants. They, too, knelt and carefully took the wrappings from their burdens; and in the yellow light gleamed gold and jewels such as I, at least, had never seen before. At the mother's feet they laid them, for the royal babe,—golden vessels, gem-encrusted, holding spicy perfumes that filled the room with their scent. And they bowed themselves again, and worshipped; and I, too, out in the darkness, slipped to my knees, and worshipped.

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At the foot of the steps, when I went down, I heard Elias' wheezing chuckle. His thick jeer followed me to sleep: "We are improving, master mine! First the shepherds in the stable; now the Magi in the chamber

on the housetop: What next? Will Herod too come and worship?"

I slept and dreamed of Herod, with his wicked, twinkling eyes and his beard dyed purple (so gossip ran), bowing in mock reverence before the babe. I was waked by a touch upon my shoulder. A servant of the Persians was come to tell me that they must be on their way. I went out. They paid their reckoning. I caught something about "that fox Herod" as Elias and I opened the gates for them. With a "Shalôm" for us, and a "Khikh" and a jerk of the halter for their soft-footed dromedaries, they disappeared in the darkness. "The Lord be with you," we called after them, and closed the gates and went back to bed. But the night's happenings were not yet over. In the grey of dawn Joseph woke me. He, too, would pay his reckoning. In the courtyard stood the patient ass, and on its back sat Mary with her child hid in her cloak. I rubbed my eyes in amazement. Joseph nodded, and spoke hurriedly: "It is the will of God. Tell no man what road we take. I have sent Elias to buy bread and cheese, and to fill my water-skins. He will meet us where the roads part. Take thou this, and the Lord reward thee for thy kindness. Peace to thee and thine." He took the single rein that hung from the ass's mouth, led his little caravan through the half-opened gate, and was gone.

* * * * *

That same day, ere yet the sun was high, we heard the clang of armor and the tramp of heavy feet. With Elias I peered out at the great gateway. The village swarmed with soldiers. The centurion, an Idumean like his royal master, stood before us, sweating and frowning under his leather helmet.

"Sons of Jacob," he demanded, "Have ye seen aught of three marvellous wise men on three marvellous camels?"

I answered shortly, that they had come and gone.

His face darkened. "By what way?"

I answered with my finger, pointing vaguely. He shrugged his shoulders under his armor, spat out an oath, and unexpectedly laughed. "The old fox hath met three foxes," quoth he, and turned away.

That moment there came a shriek from the house

across the way, and then from out the door toddled a child. He blinked in the sunlight, saw me, and with a gurgle of delight ran toward us. A soldier appeared in the doorway behind him, wiping a bloody sword. As the youngster came near us the centurion spoke to one of his men. The fellow turned, stooped, caught the child by his chubby arm, and while we stood uncomprehending, out with sword and thrust him through. He screamed once, and choked. That was all. The little form lay quivering before us. I saw the red blood spurting, and a dark pool spreading in the dust. Another long wail from the house over yonder struck my stupid ears. Then came one from up the village street, and another and another. A man's voice shouted in frenzied rage. A woman ran past us, holding her little one in her arms. One of the soldiers stepped out and tripped her up, and she fell headlong and lay gasping. He pulled the child from under her, a wee naked babe. "Dead, by Pollux!" he said, and dropped the little limp body beside the mother. She stretched out a hand and, never looking up, pulled it to her and hugged it close.

There came a steady step down the street. I looked up. It was Joses, the shepherd who had told of the vision of angels. His babe lay in his arms, its head hanging back. Its blood ran along the father's arm and dripped from his elbow. He halted before the centurion. Never a word did he speak for a moment. Then from his pale lips came wild curses. The Idumean listened and laughed; listened again and grew pale; listened a moment longer, and with a sudden motion drew his sword and thrust the shepherd through and through. He gave back, stood faltering, clutched tightly the little dead form in his arm, and fell.

* * * * *

No one laughed in the city of David that year. Nay; Elias did laugh,—once, as he drove home the bars on the gates at night. "There is yet balm in Gilead," said he; "for—ho! ho!—old fox Herod hath not slain the little king after all! Methinks I shall turn Persian and prophesy, and bid the Herod beware of a child coming out of Egypt some day!"

"One hath prophesied before thee," I answered soberly.

"One—who?"

"The Prophet Hosea."

* * * * *

It was seven and twenty years before I saw again the child of the manger. We had heard of a new prophet out of the North. His name had struck me: it was Jeshua, the babe's name. At the Passover I saw him. It was on this wise: We were entering the temple gate when there came from within a great shouting and tumult, and out of the great gateway poured a torrent of cattle and sheep and men. Down the long road they ran, cattle lowing, sheep bleating, men shouting, while we flattened ourselves against the wall, wondering and laughing. At last the torrent failed. There came one man, slower than the rest, face white with rage, hands clutching what coins he had been able to grasp from his money-changer's table. He stopped outside the gate and shook his fist, crying curses on the Prophet of Nazareth. So he was within! And this was his doing! With one accord we pressed through the gate; and there in the great court, with the crowd holding off at a little distance, he stood, a handful of followers about him. I nudged my neighbor.

"Who is he?" I asked.

He smiled derisively as he answered, "The new owner of the temple. Hast not heard of Jesus of Nazareth?"

"Yea," I said; "but of what people?"

The man replied, while his curious eyes were fixed on the Prophet, "Of Joseph the carpenter of Nazareth. To hear this fellow, one would think the carpenter had built the temple!"

I left him still jeering, and drew nearer to the Nazarene. There could be no mistake. It was the babe of the manger, grown to manhood. He wore a look somewhat of his mother, with the same calm dignity, the same clear eyes. And as I looked, I found those eyes fixed on me. Step by step, slowly, I drew closer. He spoke: "Son of Chimham, follow me!"

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Still I follow. Was he not born in my manger, this Jeshua? Did I not hold him in my arms? Aye; still I follow him,—and still shall follow.

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